

CCAS case study for inclusion in CCAS Annual Meeting

Faculty Mentoring and Chair Selection at Southern Research U.

Sarah Tyro, a recently tenured and promoted Associate Professor in Southern Research University's Department of Chemistry, has come to you, Dean Ben There, for guidance. The current and long-time department chair, S. Teddy Tiller, has just announced his plans to retire and has approached Tyro to urge her to make a bid for the leadership role. The Chemistry department at SRU is distinguished by its strong research record and the seniority of its tenured Professors, all of whom are male, and their long-running intradepartmental feuds, which tend to focus on the proper distribution of resources among these individuals with very healthy egos. Recent retirements in the department have allowed the hiring of several junior faculty members, including two women Assistant Professors; Tyro, the most senior female faculty member, is one of only two Associate Professors in the unit, the other of whom has stalled at that rank due to his limited scholarly productivity. In their conversation, Tiller revealed to Tyro that he delayed his retirement until she earned tenure, as he sees her as the sole viable internal candidate for the chair's position in the fractious unit. (SRU favors internal selection rather than national searches for chairs, particularly in fields in which sizable start-up packages are the norm.) Tiller noted that his identification of Tyro as his successor was informed by her excellent work as the department's graduate coordinator over the past three years and as co-chair of the campus's Academic Policies Committee, which he feels has demonstrated her capacity for academic leadership.

Tyro tells you that she is flattered by Tiller's confidence in her abilities and intrigued by the opportunity, one she had not previously considered. However, she is well aware of the senior faculty's penchant for internecine battles and is concerned that assuming the chair's position and the decision-making responsibilities that come with it could place her at risk of incurring their displeasure, which thus far she has largely managed to avoid. She is also worried that assuming the demanding leadership role may derail her research and thereby jeopardize a future promotion. As well, she notes that, with a young child at home, she is already struggling to maintain a healthy work-life balance. That said, she agrees with Tiller that there is no viable candidate among the bickering senior faculty, and she does not wish to see one of them appointed. Tyro is feeling pressured by Tiller to pursue the chair's position and a sense of obligation to him and her unit to "step up," but requests your advice on the wisdom of that choice.

Your own interactions with Tyro have been somewhat limited but positive, and you have been favorably impressed with her work on the institution's Academic Policies Committee. As dean, the appointment of a chair is at your discretion, although you strive to endorse a department's recommendation. Like Tiller and Tyro, you perceive no other likely candidates among the tenured faculty.

Questions:

- 1) Based on the information provided in this scenario, how would you characterize the quality of mentoring Tyro has received in her unit?
- 2) What factors present in this scenario should be weighed in providing guidance to Tyro?
- 3) What are the potential benefits to both Tyro and the department in her assuming the chair's position? What are the possible disadvantages or risks?
- 4) What are your options in identifying Tiller's successor?
- 5) What advice do you give Tyro?

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